PRICED OUT OF PROTEST

HOW RISK, COST AND FRICTION SUPPRESS PUBLIC DISSENT

Nobody tells you not to go.

There is no official prohibition. No police officer stands outside your house. No government letter arrives informing you that your presence is undesirable.

You simply think about going.

Perhaps it is a Pride event. Perhaps a climate demonstration. Perhaps a protest against a new road, a mine, a war, an airport expansion or the destruction of a local forest.

At first the decision seems simple.

You agree with the cause.

Then the calculation begins.

Will there be trouble?

Will the police be there?

Could I be searched?

Could someone attack me?

What happens if other people become violent?

What if I am photographed?

What if my employer sees it?

What if I am arrested?

What would a lawyer cost?

What if the case lasts for two years?

What if I lose?

What if I win, but only after spending money I do not have?

What if I simply feel uncomfortable standing there alone?

At some point the original political question has almost disappeared beneath another one.

Can I afford to participate?

This is one of the quieter ways dissent disappears.

We tend to imagine political repression dramatically. Governments ban organizations. Newspapers are closed. Demonstrators are beaten in the streets. Opposition leaders disappear into prisons.

Such things still happen.

But political pressure does not always need to be theatrical.

Sometimes the door remains open.

The price beside it simply rises.

The Price Beside the Door

Political freedom is usually described in terms of permission.

You may demonstrate.

You may criticize the government.

You may organize.

You may publish.

You may stand in a public square carrying a sign saying that the people running the country are idiots.

In liberal democracies, these freedoms matter enormously.

But permission is only one part of freedom.

The other is practical capacity.

Imagine two people considering exactly the same act of civil disobedience.

One has savings, a secure job, legal insurance, supportive friends and an organization prepared to pay legal expenses.

The other has little money, precarious employment and nobody particularly interested in paying for a solicitor if things go wrong.

Legally, their freedom may be identical.

Practically, it is not.

A €5,000 legal bill is an inconvenience to one person and a financial catastrophe to another.

A week away from work may be manageable for one and impossible for another.

An arrest can become an adventurous story told over dinner in one social world and the beginning of unemployment in another.

The law has prohibited neither of them from protesting.

The price has done the sorting.

This distinction matters because rights are often discussed as if they were binary.

Legal or illegal.

Permitted or prohibited.

Free or repressed.

But a right can remain legally intact while its usable range contracts.

If the practical costs attached to exercising a right rise high enough, fewer people can make use of it even though the formal permission remains.

That is not the same thing as outright repression.

But it can still alter political participation profoundly.

Europe has become sufficiently concerned about abusive lawsuits against public participation that the European

Union adopted an anti-SLAPP directive in 2024. SLAPPs, Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation, are legal actions capable of burdening journalists, campaigners and other public critics with lengthy and expensive proceedings. The EU rules allow safeguards including early dismissal of manifestly unfounded claims and, in certain cases, recovery of legal costs.

The existence of such legislation reveals something important.

A lawsuit does not have to succeed to have power.

The process itself can become part of the deterrent.

Winning Can Still Cost You

Suppose an environmental activist is charged after a protest.

Two years later the charges are dropped.

Justice has prevailed.

Perhaps.

But what happened during those two years?

There may have been legal consultations, court appearances, lost working days, uncertainty, fear of conviction and the constant administrative drizzle that accompanies a serious legal case.

If a person spends years defending herself against a case, suffers professionally, depletes savings and decides never to participate in another disruptive protest, then simply declaring that she eventually won misses part of what happened.

The legal system may have acquitted the individual.

The experience may nevertheless have disciplined the activist.

And everyone else has been watching.

That may be the more important audience.

A government does not need to arrest every protester.

A corporation does not need to sue every critic.

A handful of spectacularly expensive cases can teach thousands of people how much resistance might cost.

The message does not need to say:

Do not protest.

It can simply say:

Think carefully before you do.

That is deterrence.

And deterrence does not require that every part of the

system be malicious.

A police officer makes an arrest.

A prosecutor files a charge.

A court schedules a hearing.

A lawyer sends an invoice.

An employer records an absence.

Each action may be routine.

Together they can create an environment in which participation becomes less attractive, less practical and less widely available.

The pattern matters even when nobody designed the whole pattern.

The Rational Activist

This is where things become uncomfortable, because thinking carefully before acting is usually excellent advice.

Do not destroy your career unnecessarily.

Do not risk prison lightly.

Do not walk into violence.

Do not gamble money you cannot lose.

Do not endanger your family.

Do not sign something without reading it.

Do not provoke people who can hire better lawyers than you.

Every sentence sounds perfectly reasonable.

Together they can produce political paralysis.

The responsible citizen wakes up, calculates correctly and stays home.

This creates a peculiar possibility.

A society can contain millions of people deeply concerned about something while producing surprisingly little visible resistance.

We then look at the absence of resistance and conclude that people do not care very much.

Perhaps they care enormously.

Perhaps caring simply failed the cost calculation.

That difference matters.

Political conviction and political participation are not the same thing.

Participation occurs only when conviction becomes strong

enough to overcome friction.

Raise the friction and you can reduce participation without changing a single mind.

This is why silence is difficult to interpret politically.

Silence may mean agreement.

It may mean indifference.

It may also mean that the usable range of dissent has narrowed for the people who might otherwise have acted.

Friction

Not every cost arrives in an envelope marked LEGAL EXPENSES.

Consider something much less dramatic.

Someone thinks about attending Pride.

They support it.

They may even belong somewhere beneath the enormous rainbow umbrella.

But they would be going alone.

There has recently been violence somewhere else.

Probably nothing will happen here.

Probably.

Still, there is the possibility of being harassed.

There is the possibility of witnessing an attack.

There is heavy security.

Perhaps being alone makes them worry that security itself will scrutinize them.

There will be crowds.

Travel.

Noise.

Waiting.

Visibility.

Maybe they do not quite identify with the dominant culture of the event either. They belong to the community, but somewhere near its strange outer coastline.

None of these considerations is decisive.

That is precisely the point.

Political participation often dies from accumulation rather than prohibition.

A little anxiety.

A little inconvenience.

A little physical risk.

A little social awkwardness.

A little uncertainty about belonging.

A little expense.

A little thought that perhaps staying home would simply be easier.

Add enough small costs and enthusiasm quietly falls below the participation threshold.

Nobody has silenced this person.

Nobody has excluded them.

Nobody has forbidden anything.

And yet one potential participant has vanished.

This is why friction deserves to be taken politically seriously.

Friction is not the same as repression.

It is broader.

It includes every obstacle, cost and uncertainty that increases the effort required to turn conviction into action.

Some friction is unavoidable.

Some is legitimate.

Some is deliberately imposed.

Some emerges accidentally from the interaction of ordinary institutions and ordinary caution.

The political effect can still be real.

Who Gets Filtered Out?

The costs of participation are not distributed evenly.

Some people possess reserves.

Money is one reserve.

Time is another.

So is social confidence.

Citizenship.

Legal knowledge.

A supportive family.

An activist network.

A union.

An organization with lawyers.

A profession where political visibility is tolerated.

The ability to lose several thousand euros without disaster.

Even the simple knowledge that if you are arrested at midnight somebody will answer the telephone.

These resources alter the practical meaning of identical political rights.

For someone surrounded by fifty friends, walking into a demonstration may feel exhilarating.

For someone arriving alone, the same crowd can feel strangely exposing.

For a university student, spending an afternoon at a protest may cost almost nothing.

For someone working an hourly job, it may literally cost wages.

For a wealthy campaigner, litigation may be unpleasant.

For somebody already close to financial instability, the mere possibility of litigation may determine behavior long before anybody files a case.

Political participation therefore has an entrance fee.

We simply rarely print it on the ticket.

And as the entrance fee rises, the participant pool changes.

The filtering does not happen evenly.

The cautious may disappear.

So may the financially vulnerable.

People with insecure jobs.

People who dislike confrontation.

Those without organizations behind them.

Anyone who looks at the calculation and reasonably decides they have too much to lose.

The movement that remains may become more concentrated around unusually committed participants.

That creates a feedback loop.

Higher cost produces a narrower activist pool.

A narrower pool may appear more radical.

Perceived radicalism can justify greater restrictions.

Greater restrictions raise the cost again.

The temperature rises.

Only the organisms adapted to heat remain.

Then everyone points at the strange fish.

The Heroic Myth

Activist culture sometimes responds badly to this problem.

It creates heroes.

The person who risked everything.

The person who went to prison.

The person who stood alone before the bulldozer.

The person who kept speaking while everyone else became frightened.

Such people can be remarkable.

But heroism is a terrible foundation for democratic participation.

A functioning political culture cannot depend on citizens being willing to destroy their livelihoods every time an important issue appears.

If dissent increasingly requires exceptional courage, exceptional financial security or exceptional tolerance for personal risk, then the legal right may survive while the usable range of participation shrinks.

That is the danger.

Not that nobody can protest.

That fewer kinds of people can do so without disproportionate sacrifice.

A democracy becomes politically narrower when ordinary dissent requires extraordinary resilience.

From Europe to Elsewhere

In wealthy democracies, these mechanisms are usually constrained by courts, rights protections, civil society organizations and public scrutiny.

That distinction matters.

Being fined after blocking a motorway in Britain is not equivalent to disappearing into a prison system under an authoritarian government.

Mechanisms can belong to the same family without being equally severe.

At one end sits mild inconvenience.

At another sits financial destruction.

Further along come criminal conviction and imprisonment.

Elsewhere there may be intimidation, violence or death.

These should never be casually equated.

But neither should the existence of the worst forms blind us to the effectiveness of quieter ones.

Political pressure works long before it reaches the prison cell.

A right can become less usable without becoming formally unavailable.

That gradient matters.

Democracy at Retail Price

There is a comforting democratic sentence:

Everyone has the right to protest.

There is another sentence that receives less attention:

Not everyone can afford to exercise it equally.

Once that distinction becomes visible, some familiar political observations begin to look different.

Declining attendance does not necessarily mean declining conviction.

Political silence does not necessarily mean agreement.

The absence of public resistance does not necessarily mean that a population has consented.

People may simply have performed the calculation.

Modern political systems are particularly good at converting collective problems into individual risk decisions.

Climate change is planetary.

But the decision to sit in a road belongs to one body.

A corporation possesses lawyers, insurance and institutional continuity.

The activist possesses a Tuesday afternoon and a bank account.

The state can survive ten thousand court cases.

The individual may struggle to survive one.

That asymmetry changes behavior even when every institutional step appears procedurally proper.

Perhaps especially then.

A system can generate strong deterrent effects precisely because no single action looks extraordinary.

The police officer makes an arrest.

The prosecutor files a charge.

The company requests an injunction.

The court schedules a hearing.

The employer notices an absence.

The lawyer sends an invoice.

Nobody has to behave like a dictator.

Everybody merely follows procedure.

Together they create an environment.

And organisms adapt to environments.

The Cost of Being Seen

There is another price that is harder to calculate.

Visibility.

Activism means turning private conviction into public identity.

You cease to be merely someone who thinks something.

You become somebody who was there.

Your face exists in photographs.

Your name may appear online.

Colleagues can see you.

Neighbors can see you.

Hostile strangers can see you.

Police can see you.

People on your own side can see you too and begin deciding whether you belong correctly.

For people who fit comfortably inside a movement, visibility can produce belonging.

For people occupying a niche inside a niche inside a niche, visibility can produce uncertainty.

Do these people represent me?

Do I represent them?

Will I be accepted?

Will I have to explain myself?

Am I here because this is genuinely my community or because this is the nearest available category?

Again, nobody needs to exclude such a person deliberately.

The social price of participation may do the work.

Political movements therefore compete not only against ideological opposition.

They compete against exhaustion.

Against embarrassment.

Against precarity.

Against bureaucracy.

Against fear.

Against loneliness.

Against the sofa.

The sofa is an underestimated political force.

Permission Is Not Enough

None of this means protest should be consequence-free.

Blocking a hospital entrance cannot be justified simply by declaring it activism.

Destroying property creates victims.

Other citizens possess rights too.

Public order is not an imaginary concern invented exclusively to torment demonstrators.

This is precisely why the argument becomes difficult.

Every society must negotiate collisions between protest and ordinary life.

But that negotiation should not end once somebody says:

You were legally allowed to protest somewhere.

The important question is what kinds of dissent remain

practically possible once all the costs are included.

If harmless protest is permitted but ineffective, while effective protest carries potentially ruinous consequences, the legal right to dissent may remain intact while its usable range contracts.

That can produce political effects remarkably similar to control.

Sometimes it is intentional.

Sometimes it is not.

The result can emerge from laws, policing, employment, insurance, litigation, media exposure, social hostility and ordinary human caution interacting with one another.

Eventually the citizen learns the environment.

Be careful.

Do not become visible.

Do not risk the job.

Do not attract legal attention.

Do not stand alone.

Do not make yourself expensive.

And because every piece of advice makes individual sense,

the collective result can remain almost invisible.

Priced Out

Perhaps this is why the conventional question about political freedom is insufficient.

We ask:

Are people allowed to dissent?

We should also ask:

What does dissent cost them?

The answer cannot be reduced to money.

The price may be €500.

Or a criminal record.

Or two years of legal uncertainty.

Or an employer quietly deciding that someone is troublesome.

Or a hostile crowd.

Or the possibility of violence.

Or the exhaustion of bureaucracy.

Or the vulnerability of standing alone among thousands of people and wondering whether you belong there at all.

Each cost changes the probability that conviction becomes action.

Raise enough of them and participation begins to disappear.

Then one morning the streets look quiet.

The demonstrations are smaller.

The troublesome campaign has faded.

The public appears to have moved on.

Perhaps it has.

Or perhaps enough people looked at the price beside the open door and decided not to enter.

A democracy may truthfully say that nobody stopped them.

That is no longer quite enough.

The sharper question is:

Who could still afford to go?